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SUBJECT: USUNESCO: UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CIVIL SOCIETY IN SUPPORT OF MIDDLE EAST PEACE HELD AT UNESCO HEADQUARTERS JULY 12-13

¶11. Summary. The United Nations International Conference on Civil Society in Support of Middle East Peace was held at UNESCO headquarters July 12-13. The conference was organized by the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and was invited by UNESCO to hold its meeting at UNESCO headquarters. The tendentious meeting castigated Israel for human rights violations and cast the United States as an accomplice in Israel's actions. Words like apartheid, divestment and boycott were used extensively over the two days. There was no Israeli representation at the meeting. End summary.

¶12. The plenary was chaired by Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General of the UN Office in Geneva and Representative of the Secretary General. The keynote speech was given by an American,

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Phyllis Bennis, co-chair of the International Coordinating Network for Palestine. Bennis' speech was harshly critical of both the Israeli and US governments.

¶13. A series of workshops were held over the two days. One workshop stressed the failure of the international community to respond to the call for effective international pressure against Israel - i.e. a sustained economic boycott or international sanctions. The workshop included a power point presentation entitled "Boycott as Civil Resistance - The Moral Dimension: Closing the Door to Justice" by Omar Barghouti, an independent Palestinian political analyst for the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (Jerusalem). Barghouti called for divestments and boycotts against Israel, for constructive and ethical dialogue, and for de-colonization. "Boycott," he said, "is moral resistance."

¶14. In another workshop, Luisa Sirvent, Secretary-General of the Spanish Federation for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights, provided an overall picture of what is involved in engaging governments. The points she highlighted were:

-- That Palestine is a wholly occupied territory in which Israel has absolute power.
-- That Israel is in violation of international law (ICJ advisory opinion, Geneva IV).
-- That the Israeli government is engaged in a PR campaign aimed at Western governments that seeks to shift the focus of the international community away from the situation in Palestine.
-- That the governments of EU member states continue to receive Israeli leaders, sign agreements and continue trade with Israel. As long as the U.S. maintains a strategic alliance with Israel, EU states are reluctant to take any action further than issuing statements condemning the situation.

¶15. There were numerous other workshops, most along similar lines. We did notice that Rema Jaous Imseis, Legal Officer from the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) during a workshop on working with the UN said that pressure needs to be put on the Palestine Authority for more transparency.

¶16. During the second plenary session, the final recommendations of all the workshops were reported. These included:

-- Consolidating opposition to the occupation with anti-war groups.
-- The need for NGOs and the UN need to work against racism.
-- The use of boycotts, divestments and sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law.
-- Creation of an international tribunal for Palestine.

¶17. Comment. We note sadly that this meeting was held the same day a suicide bomber killed two young Israelis in front of a shopping center and to our knowledge this was not mentioned during the meetings. The tone of this meeting stands in sharp contrast to the way Israeli-Palestinian issues have been treated during the last two years at UNESCO. The "UNESCO model" for dialogue has been held up as a way forward to resolve some of the more difficult issues in UN fora. This model relies on dialogue and goodwill, something clearly missing during the international conference. We also note that the Anti-Defamation league issued a press release on July 15 that condemned the meeting and called

for the abolition of the Committee on the Exercise of the
Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. End Comment.

OLIVER